

President John J. Flynn
International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers
Statement for the Record on H.R. 1716
Veterans Earn and Learn Act
April 30, 2003

Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide this statement on House Resolution 1716, the Veterans Earn and Learn Act, as it relates to educational assistance programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs for Apprenticeship or certain on-job training.

The International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers (BAC) has a long history of proactive support for the Armed Forces of this country and the men and women who serve it with distinction in times of peace and in times of war. We have welcomed those who sacrificed so much for their nation, offering training, jobs as well as secure pensions and benefits to veterans returning from war. We continue to do so today through our involvement in the Helmets to Hardhats program.

We are proud of all our past and current members and within our membership roles are the names of thousands of veterans who responded to the call to action when our country needed them. After that time of action passed, most of them returned to their families and returned to their jobs building this country literally "brick by brick". Sadly, many of our members did not return because they had given their lives for this country's greater good. Those members who returned, and those who could not, share in a bond that unites them in a unique way, they are masonry craftsmen and they are United States military veterans. The unique bond that is developed through membership in both the military and the union is very similar, yet is difficult to explain to those who have not experienced it first hand.

Today's veterans and reservists transitioning to the civilian job market face the same difficult tasks as their predecessors, and in many ways it can be more difficult. Many return to job markets that have few job openings due to a faltering economy. Many could be taken advantage of because of their lack of knowledge in how the system works in the civilian employment sector and the additional opportunities, which could be available if they knew where to look for training or work. Through the Registered Apprenticeship System veterans have an opportunity to learn the manipulative and technical skills that will advance them along a career path from the entry level position or Apprentice Level, through the Journey worker level, and potentially onward to supervisory levels or even ownership of their own companies. This system fosters skill acquisition and lifelong learning as a means of advancement and success. In the organized sector of the economy this career path is built on a cooperative labor/management agreement with jointly funded training programs and a contractor who is more likely to hire the worker trained in such a program. The Registered Apprentice System we know today is a modernized and modified yet time proven system of career skill education, combining learning on the job and related technical instruction.

Today as yesterday, veterans deserve the opportunity to learn their craft through a structured apprenticeship system under the supervision of their employers in partnership with the critical eye of experienced craftsmen. This is a partnership, which is dedicated to teaching this next generation the craft skills to succeed at their profession and encourage them to advance in their chosen career. In the BAC apprenticeship system the costs of the training are born by contractual arrangement between the industry partners: the contractor and the union. This contract insures that the benefits remain with the veteran and are considered as their discretionary income.

As military veterans are promised, there are certain benefit's programs available that they receive as payment for serving in the Armed Forces. It is appropriate that the government assist them in transitioning into the civilian job market when their service is complete. Certain benefit modifications within H.R. 1716 will assist veterans in making that transition less of a hardship on them and their families. The modification to allow additional provision for educational pursuits associated with their careers will benefit many veterans as they move along their chosen career path. However, I urge the committee to ensure that the true beneficiary is the veteran and his or her career plan. Incentives for what is being called "early completion" must be tempered with validation processes and procedures to insure that the skills taught are the correct skills, that the student has mastered them totally, and that the student is able to transfer those skills into sound practices and decisions as the job requires. I have concerns that a veteran could be "fast tracked" through a less than competent training system and be unable to successfully compete in today's highly competitive job market. With his or her VA benefits exhausted, finding additional training could be a difficult and frustrating task.

In summary, increases in the career and educational benefits to which Veterans are entitled, is a cause which all of us support wholeheartedly. No one group deserves more in appreciation for the service that they have given to us all in defending our national sovereignty. Our duty should always be to insure that the military veteran benefits through these entitlements by validating only meaningful training programs that will result in the achievement of truly worthwhile careers. The government must fulfill its obligation to our veterans by funding those programs that provide the training for advancement, which is limited only by the veteran's desire to reach their goals.